

SUCCESS STORY

AGRISTO, BELGIUM

Agristo has recently invested in two new optical sorters and one upgrade of an older installation. After an extensive market analysis, the potato processor decided to consign this project to BEST. The most important reason why they have chosen BEST over competitors was the fact that their Genius sorter technologically is the pick of the bunch and is furthermore able to anticipate new tendencies and customer requirements.

Agristo was founded in 1985 by two Belgian associates who were active in the agricultural and frozen food industry. It all started with a small production line in Harelbeke (West-Flanders) where about 20.000 ton of frozen French fries were produced. Antoon Wallays, member of the direction, says: "Because the Belgian retail market was almost completely occupied at that time, Agristo has always concentrated on export. In the beginning we mainly worked for the French market, but we gradually became active in more and more countries. In 2001 we were already producing 60.000 ton of product per year. When we took over a production facility in Tilburg (The Netherlands), we managed to nearly double our capacity. From that moment on, everything went very fast: thanks to a well-considered operational management and an effective investment policy, we produced more than 140.000 ton of product last year, which resulted in a turnover of about 100 million euro.

Today we produce frozen French fries and other potato products such as spicy wedges, baked potatoes, etc. In total, we have fifty different recipes and hundreds of references. Three fourths of our products is under private label, the remainder is commercialized under the own brands Agristo, International, Maestro and Mondy. Agristo is still an export concentrated company: our assortment is now available all over the world, in more than thirty countries.

About 70% is sold in Europe, with France and the United Kingdom as the most important consumers. The remainder is sold in Australia, Central – and South America, Africa and the Middle East.



Our customers' database consists mainly of large distributors, but we also supply collectivities, catering companies and producers of ready meals.

STRONG PREFERENCE FOR PULSARR

From the beginning, Agristo choose for advanced automation and was never afraid to take risks. The potato processor was one of the very first customers of the Dutch company Pulsarr. Dieter Raes from the Project/ Automation department in Agristo continues: "It was, however, a well-considered decision to start working with Pulsarr.

The RX sorting machine that Pulsarr offered at that time, was without a doubt one of the BEST that was available on the market. Furthermore, the machine turned out to be very effective and reliable. That is the reason why we stuck with Pulsarr when we needed an additional sorting machine for our new production facility in The Netherlands."



NEED FOR MODERNIZATION

But at a certain time, even the most progressive machine becomes outdated. Due to the limited capacity, the original sorter became a bottleneck in Agristo's production a couple of years ago. Dieter Raes explains: "If you know we grow about ten percent every year, you will not be surprised that the problems got worse and worse. Last year, the management decided to tackle the problem and released the needed budget for a total modernization project.

Because in the meantime Pulsarr was taken over by BEST and we did not have any experience with that manufacturer, we decided not only to consider the offer of BEST but also study the other possibilities that were on the market. According to this analysis it became clear that BEST stood out concerning future technology. In addition, their Genius sorters have some features that are highly interesting for our production. The infeed shaker for example with a width of two meters instead of the usual 1,6 meters, which tackled one of our most important bottlenecks in our production. The possibility to monitor and operate the machine from a distance also appealed to us. This way, we could operate and supervise the whole process from the quality department. Furthermore, BEST can connect to the machine from anywhere in the world for online assistance and diagnosis. A third aspect which makes the Genius stand out from competitors is the accuracy and user friendliness. Before start-up, a frame grab, which reflects a real picture shot of the good and bad incoming French fries, is made and recorded by the memory of the installation. It is on the basis of this image that the sorter inspects all products to find defects. This is a very flexible way of working, and makes it easy to meet customers' requirements." Antoon Wallays continues: "Another advantage was that BEST was also able to upgrade our other sorter. This way, we received a machine with advanced technology that could be operated on the same Genius platform without having to invest in a new system. It is not only a big advantage to dispose of the latest technology without having to change the production line, but uniformity of installations is also important for the operator and maintenance people. Finally, the proximity of the company played a role in our decision process. Sorting machines play a crucial role in our production. If they break down, the failure needs to be repaired as quickly as possible. We felt it was important to be able to count on a Belgian company for such reparations ..."

WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The new optical sorter is located in the fresh cut department of Agristo and is meant to detect and reject all potato products with color or structure defects and possible foreign material. Steve Raskin, Area Sales Manager of BEST, explains the technical aspects of the installation. It is a modular system that can be equipped with monochromatic and/or full color cameras, fluo-, laser- and/or infrared technology, etc. according to the customers' requirements



"What makes our sorters different from others is their flexibility to be extended or adapted at any time after the machine has been installed. Most new developments can be implemented in existing equipment. This results into a machine that can grow along with the customer. Furthermore, the cameras work according to the world-wide accepted CameraLink™ protocol, which makes it easy for us to implement new types. Because of this, the system will always be progressive. Finally, we use a manifold with powerful air guns that react three times faster in our newest sorters. Thanks to their speed and precision less good product is wasted. The products fall directly from the cutting line onto the infeed shaker, which spreads the product uniformly and evenly.



The product then arrives in the inspection zone where six cameras detect defects from all sides. The position of the product that does not meet these quality standards is recorded in the electronics. This information is passed on to the manifold (positioned at the end of the conveyor belt) where the right air gun removes the affected French fries just a few milliseconds after detection, while the good product continues untouched into the accept chute and on to the production line."

COMPLIMENTS TO BEST!

BEST installed an optical sorter in the Agristo facilities in Belgium and The Netherlands. Furthermore, they upgraded a sorting machine which is located further in the processing line and inspects the frozen fries before they are packed. Dieter Raes: "Actually only the frame, the belt and the manifold were kept. Everything else – cameras, computer, software, etc. – was replaced. The reason why we choose for an upgrade was that we did not dispose of enough space to install a larger new sorter and also because the capacity did not need to increase in this stadium. "Antoon Wallays concludes: "we have to admit we are very pleased with the professionalism of BEST. The whole project only took four days for every facility to install the machines, one of which was entirely spent to training the personnel. That is a very short time for such an installation, especially if you know we were not confronted with any kind of problem after start-up of the machine. BEST also deserves compliments for their workmanship and service. That is why we have already consigned a new project to BEST: the development of a sorting machine for an additional production line in the Netherlands that will become operational next year. If they complete this project with the same kind of professionalism, BEST will without a doubt become our supplier for everything concerning sorting- and vision technology."

Are you interested in more information, or a free demonstration, please contact us directly or visit our website.



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